Grade 11 - Narrative

An Exciting Find

Tammy wiped her palms across her wet forehead, realizing that she was also wiping dirt across her face, as she felt a slight sting in her eyes. She knew she'd be finished digging for the day in a few hours and looked forward to cleansing herself with water. Even though she knew the water from the rain barrel would be shockingly cold, it was still refreshing to use the outdoor facilities at the camp. In fact, Tammy was enjoying everything about her first dig.

She knelt on the dig pad, brushing at the dirt. Every once in a while she would gaze at the Badlands of South Dakota, where steep hills had been laid bare by the wind to reveal sharply eroded buttes and pinnacles. She moved under one of the shade canopies and drank some water. Back at her dig site, she tucked her water bottle in a nearby rock crevice and noticed a movement. She paused a moment, searching. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed at the flap of a bright green tarp blowing in the wind and laughed.

The color of the tarp reminded Tammy of her first dinosaur—a plastic model of a giant lizard with bright green colors. She had so many questions about dinosaurs that she had delved into her school library to find the answers. She had learned that people and dinosaurs never lived at the same time; that dinosaurs are named after a characteristic body feature, the place where they were found, or after a person involved in the discovery; that the largest known dinosaur, the Brachiosaurus ("arm lizard"), was about the length of two large school buses and the height of a four-story building; and that most dinosaurs ate plants, such as evergreen conifers, ferns, and mosses. Tammy had been most excited to learn that some dinosaurs had lived in South Dakota. Granted, it was a very long time ago, but it was still exciting to realize that the animals had traveled where she lived now.

Learning about dinosaurs had eventually brought Tammy to the science of paleontology. She learned that paleontology is the study of fossils and what they indicate about the past. Paleontology incorporates knowledge from earth sciences, life sciences, history, and even computer science. Tammy had never lost her interest of fossils, and now she had an opportunity to participate in an actual dig.

Tammy shifted her weight on the dig pad, adjusted the brim of her hat, and, feeling thirsty, she glanced over at her water bottle. She jumped to her feet as she noticed a creature with a little white face, a black mask, and catlike ears before it bounded off, its sleek body arching and elongating as its black legs took it farther away.

Tammy described the animal to the on-site naturalist, who said it sounded like a black-footed ferret, which weighs about two pounds and measures two feet from nose to tail. He said that the animals had been newly introduced to the region near a prairie

dog colony. Tammy hunted around for further signs of the ferret but went back to her excavation after a short period of time.

Tammy's brush swept over the rocky soil repeatedly. As she worked, she looked around at the other participants of the dig—adults and teenagers from all over the country. While sitting around the campfire last night, they had shared their impressions. One of the diggers had described the experience rather poetically as "a long day of peeling back the slope of a ridgeline with shovels, awls, and buckets, exposing an awe-inspiring display of bones that lay like pale pickup-sticks jumbled in disarray." Tammy had revealed that the possibility of finding the remains of ancient creatures and sharing the experience with a group of like-minded people in the breathtaking Badlands of South Dakota was the fulfillment of a dream for her.

As Tammy packed up her tools for the night, she decided to take some pictures of the dig site against the setting sun. As she focused the lens, she noticed a movement nearby and whirled around to see the ferret, perched on a rocky outcrop, wiggling its nose and seemingly ready for fun. The small mammal led a merry chase around the site, as Tammy took picture after picture of it dashing here and there. Her photos never quite captured the elusive animal, only a black hind foot in one, the top of an ear in another, and a disappearing shadow in the next.

At the end of the week, Tammy was feeling disheartened about her lack of success in finding any dinosaur fossils. Almost everyone else had found something, and today was the last day of the dig. She was trying to determine where to continue her search, when she spotted the ferret again, sitting near a fairly new area of the dig site that few people had yet investigated. As Tammy approached, the ferret turned and fluidly scampered away. Seeing the animal again had started the day optimistically, and Tammy began tediously brushing once again.

Just a few strokes into the task, Tammy uncovered part of a large bone in a mass of rock. She carefully took compass readings and measurements, and then she photographed the site. She used special glue spray to harden the part of the bone that was protruding from the rock. Next, she carefully wrapped the bone as she had been instructed by the paleontologist and crated it so it could be taken to a laboratory.

At the on-site lab, Tammy watched as the bone was carefully removed from the crate and separated from the adherent rock with special tools designed for that purpose. Then, a paleontologist photographed the bone and said that it would be studied to determine the kind of dinosaur it had come from. Tammy laughed and said the dinosaur should be named the black-footed dinosaur since it was a black-footed ferret that had led her to the discovery.